

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please substitute the following claims for the same-numbered claims in the application:

Please cancel the following claims:

Claims 1-13 (Canceled).

Please add the following claims:

14. (New) A method for honoring electronic coupons utilizing computing equipment, said method comprising:

an issuing party issuing an electronic coupon to a customer;
said customer presenting said coupon for redemption to a redemption party;
said redemption party transmitting said coupon to an authentication party for authentication, said authentication party being different than said issuing party;
said authentication party determining whether said coupon is authentic;
said authentication party charging said redemption party a fee upon determination that said coupon is authentic;
said authentication party passing said fee to said issuing party;
said redemption party honoring said coupon from said customer; and
upon said honoring, said redemption party seeking reimbursement of said fee from said issuing party.

15. (New) The method of claim 14, wherein after said presenting, said method further comprising said redemption party verifying validity of said coupon with said issuing party.

16. (New) The method of claim 15, further comprising establishing the validity of said coupon using an electronic signature.

17. (New) The method of claim 16, wherein in said establishing said electronic signature is achieved by public key cryptography.

18. (New) The method of claim 14, wherein prior to said issuing, said method further comprising said authentication party issuing a plurality of blank said coupons to said issuing party for subsequent use.

19. (New) The method of claim 18, wherein in said issuing a plurality of blank said coupons to said issuing party for subsequent use, said coupons include variable fields that are generated by one-way hash functions.

20. (New) The method of claim 14, wherein in said determining, said authentication party determines authenticity of a received coupon by checking whether one-way hash functions included in said coupons are valid.

21. (New) The method of claim 20, wherein in said determining, said authentication party further determines authenticity of said received coupon by checking whether said received coupon has been used before.

22. (New) The method of claim 21, wherein in said determining, upon checking that said received coupon has not been used before, said authentication party issuing a validity certificate to said redeeming party.

23. (New) The method of claim 20, wherein in said honoring, said redeeming party providing said issuing party with a proof of purchase of an item for which said coupon is being applied toward.

24. (New) An electronic coupon having a plurality of data fields, said electronic coupon comprising:

- a coupon identifier;

- a coupon authentication verification function field; and

- a secure signature function field bearing a signature of an issuing party of said electronic coupon,

wherein said coupon identifier and said coupon authentication verification function field are adapted to be verified only by an authentication party, said authentication party being different than said issuing party.

25. (New) The electronic coupon of claim 24, further comprising a customizable information function field adapted to retain information maintained by said issuing party and said authentication party.

26. (New) An electronic commerce system facilitating electronic coupon issuance and

redemption, said electronic commerce system comprising:

at least one issuing party component adapted to issue an electronic coupon to a customer;

at least one redemption party component adapted to electronically receive said electronic coupon for redemption; and

an authentication party component in communication with said issuing party component and said redemption party component, said authentication party component being different than said issuing party component;

wherein said redemption party component is adapted to transmit a received electronic coupon to said authentication party component for authentication,

wherein said authentication party component is adapted to charge said redemption party component a fee and to pass said fee to said issuing party component, and

wherein said redemption party component being further adapted to honor said electronic coupon and seek reimbursement from said issuing party component.

27. The electronic commerce system of claim 26, wherein said electronic coupon comprises:

a coupon identifier;

a coupon authentication verification function field; and

a secure signature function field bearing a signature of an issuing party of said electronic coupon,

wherein said coupon identifier and said coupon authentication verification function field are adapted to be verified only by said authentication party component.

28. (New) The electronic commerce system of claim 27, wherein said electronic coupon

further comprising a customizable information function field adapted to retain information maintained by said issuing party component and said authentication party component.

29. The electronic commerce system of claim 26, wherein said issuing party component comprises a promotion definition component adapted to define a promotion scheme for said issuing party component

30. The electronic commerce system of claim 29, wherein said issuing party component further comprises a distribution component adapted to handle distribution of said electronic coupon to said customer based on said promotion scheme.

31. The electronic commerce system of claim 30, wherein said issuing party component further comprises a clearing component adapted to receive a redeemed electronic coupon from said customer.

32. The electronic commerce system of claim 26, wherein said authentication party component comprises a unique electronic identifier different from an electronic identifier of said issuing party component.

33. The electronic commerce system of claim 26, wherein said authentication party component comprises a database of redeemed electronic coupons.